

## Greenwich Historical Society Presents Works of Local Mid-century Artist Who Pioneered Radical Ceramic Art Forms

*Katherine Choy's works drew inspiration from modern art movements, fueling a rapid ascent to prominence and a legacy in the world of ceramic art throughout the country*

**COS COB, Conn., October 2023** -- Greenwich Historical Society is proud to present *Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands: Katherine Choy and Clay Art Center*, an exhibition of work by influential ceramic artist, educator and visionary co-founder of Clay Art Center, **Katherine Choy** (1927-1958). Choy, a pioneering figure in the world of mid-twentieth century American studio ceramics, created innovative ceramic vessels now present in the collections of the **Metropolitan Museum of Art**, the **Museum of Arts and Design**, the **Newark Museum of Art** and the **New Orleans Museum of Art**.



*Photo by Asher Almonacy*

On view through February 4, 2024, *Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands* features a selection of Choy's distinctive and boundary-pushing ceramic vessels alongside never-before-seen photographs, letters, and other archival material from the Clay Art Center collection, charting Choy's rapid rise to artistic prominence, her indelible influence as an educator and her dedication to forming a cooperative studio space for ceramic artists to thrive in Port Chester, N.Y.

"Katherine Choy's work was on the cutting edge of contemporary ceramic art," says Historical Society Curator of Exhibitions and Collections Maggie Dimock. "As a rising talent at an exciting time in the development of American studio ceramics, she was producing clay vessels that explored many of the same formal ideas at play in the concurrent field of abstract expressionist painting in the 1940s and 50s. A young artist who emigrated from China in 1946 at the age of 19, her rapid ascent to prominence was remarkable, and speaks to her intense ambition and vision."

In 1957 Choy channeled her visionary approach to ceramics and community into the founding of Clay Art Center, an independent studio for serious ceramic artists, located in the working-class New York suburb of Port Chester. This endeavor was realized with the support of co-founder **Henry Okamoto** (1922-1988), a Japanese-American potter from California who from the early 1950s resided in nearby Cos Cob, a section of Greenwich, Conn. Through Choy and Okamoto's leadership Clay Art Center's reputation as a serious center for ceramic study and artistic production grew among American potters.

"Choy and Okamoto came to Port Chester in the 1950s as outsiders, but their mark on the local artistic community was immediate and enduring," says Dimock. "Through letters, photographs and other personal items both left behind, this exhibition presents an incredible glimpse into the working and artistic lives of two people with lasting personal influence on the world of ceramic art."

*Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands* at the Greenwich Historical Society brings the story of Katherine Choy and Henry Okamoto to life in the same community where they lived and worked, and where Clay Art Center continues to serve the tristate area as an important center for ceramic art. It comes at a time of revitalized interest and recognition of Katherine Choy's artistic legacy; Choy's work was featured in an installation of Chinese women ceramic artists at Manitoga, The Russell Wright Design Center in Garrison, N.Y. in summer 2023, and was the subject of the exhibition and accompanying catalogue *Katherine Choy: Radical Potter in 1950s New Orleans*, at the New Orleans Museum of Art, curated by Mel Buchanan, RosaMary Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, in 2022-23.

*Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands: Katherine Choy and Clay Art Center* is organized by the Greenwich Historical Society with artwork loans and research support provided by Clay Art Center. The exhibition is generously supported in part by Josie Merck.

### **Workshops/Lectures/Curated Tours**

Curator-led gallery talks and public hands-on clay workshops and demonstrations, in partnership with Clay Art Center, will be offered throughout the exhibition's run:

- November 2: 6:30 – 8:30 pm: A hands-on clay workshop dedicated to hand-building organic vase forms will be led by Clay Art Center Studio Technician and past Artist-in-Residence Avery Wells. For more information and to register: <https://greenwichhistory.org/event/wheel-and-hand-choy/>

- November 10: 11am – 12pm: *Visionary Art Pottery and Studio Craft in Our Backyard: Leon Gambetta Volkmar and Katherine Choy*, discussion and guided tour will explore connections between the lives and legacies of Greenwich-area ceramic artists Leon Gambetta Volkmar (1879-1959) and Katherine Choy. A prominent figure in the N.Y. art pottery world, Volkmar's handcrafted and sensitively glazed ceramic vessels were nationally recognized and collected broadly by connoisseurs, including the Bush-Holley House's one-time resident Emma Constant Holley MacRae. A selection of Volkmar pieces from the Greenwich Historical Society Museum Collection will be on display for the duration of the exhibition. For more information and to register: <https://greenwichhistory.org/event/volkmar/>
- January 18, 2024: 6pm – 7pm: Mel Buchanan, RosaMary Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, will present an illustrated lecture detailing Katherine Choy's remarkable career as a ceramic artist and educator, highlighting her years spent in New Orleans leading ceramics at Newcomb College and connecting with the city's artistic vanguard. Buchanan, Curator of Decorative Arts and Design at NOMA, is the curator and author of *Katherine Choy: Radical Potter in 1950s New Orleans* (2022). For more information and to register: <https://greenwichhistory.org/event/lecture-choy-potter-1950s/>
- January 25, 2024: 11am – 12pm Historical Society Curator Maggie Dimock will host an in-depth tour and conversation about the exhibition *Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands* followed by coffee and light refreshments in the Museum Café. For more information and to register: <https://greenwichhistory.org/event/coffee-tour-choy/>

For information about all public programs please visit [www.greenwichhistory.org](http://www.greenwichhistory.org) or call (203) 869-6899

Greenwich Historical Society is located at 47 Strickland Rd., Cos Cob, Conn. Museum galleries are open Wednesdays through Sunday, from 12pm - 4pm, with museum admission.

### **Katherine Choy: Ceramic Artist and Educator**

Born in Hong Kong to a prosperous merchant family and raised in Shanghai, **Katherine Po-Yu Choy** came to the U.S. in 1946 to enroll as a student at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. She continued her education at Mills College in California and the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, studying painting and ceramics under pioneering studio potters F. Carlton Ball and Maija Grotell and textile design under Marianne Strengell. In 1952 at the age of 24 she was appointed head of ceramics at Newcomb College in New Orleans. Under Choy's leadership the Newcomb ceramics program transitioned into a new era of freedom and experimentation. Meanwhile Choy's profile as a nationally recognized ceramic artist known for her innovative approach to form and distinctive glazed surfaces continued to rise.

### **Establishing Clay Art Center**

In the spring of 1957, following her dream to establish a fully independent working studio for ceramic artists, Choy gathered a small group of like-minded artists and former students and moved into a large ceramic workspace on Beech Street in Port Chester, which formerly housed Good Earth Pottery, a commercial ceramics operation where Choy had consulted as a designer. Under Choy's leadership, the

“Clay Art Center for Advanced Study in Ceramics and Sculpture” was formed, one of the first cooperative studios dedicated solely to creative ceramic art in the U.S. (known then and now more simply as “Clay Art Center”). Choy was supported in this endeavor by Clay Art Center Co-founder and potter **Henry Okamoto**, who moved to Cos Cob in the mid-1950s. Through their leadership Clay Art Center’s reputation as a serious center for ceramic study and artistic production grew among American potters.

Choy’s tragic, unexpected death in 1958 at the age of 30, only a year after Clay Art Center’s founding marked the end of a promising career and jeopardized the future of the fledgling Clay Art Center. Under Okamoto’s oversight, Clay Art Center’s mission endured. Today Clay Art Center is the largest and most active ceramic facility in the tristate area and a nationally recognized nonprofit dedicated to the advancement and practice of ceramic art.

### **About Greenwich Historical Society**

[Greenwich Historical Society](#) was founded in 1931 to preserve and interpret Greenwich history to strengthen the community’s connection to our past, to each other and to our future. The circa 1730 National Historic Landmark Bush-Holley House witnessed the American Revolution, holds the memory of enslaved men, women and children and became the site of Connecticut’s first American Impressionist art colony from 1890 to 1920. Its landscape and gardens are restored based on documentation from the site’s Impressionist era. The campus also includes a nationally accredited museum, library and archives, a museum store, café, and a community education center. Greenwich Historical Society educates thousands of school children annually and connects visitors to the history of this globally influential community through exhibitions, lectures, programs and events. It receives no town funding and relies on donations and grants to continue its work in education and preservation. Learn more at [greenwichhistory.org](#).

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## Historical Society to Present Works of Nationally Renowned Ceramic Artist Katherine Choy

**Visionary artist and educator pioneered a radical ceramic style, establishing a lasting  
legacy in American Craft**

***Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands: Katherine Choy and Clay Art Center***  
***On view: October 18, 2023 – February 4, 2024***

**COS COB, Conn., September 11, 2023** -- Greenwich Historical Society is proud to present *Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands: Katherine Choy and Clay Art Center*, an exhibition of work by influential ceramic artist, educator and visionary co-founder of Clay Art Center, Katherine Choy (1927-1958). Featuring a selection of Choy's distinctive and boundary-pushing ceramic vessels alongside never-before-seen photographs, letters, and other archival material, the exhibition charts Katherine Choy's rapid rise to prominence and influence in the field of American studio ceramics in the mid-1950s, her indelible influence as an educator, and her dedication to forming a cooperative studio space for ceramic artists to thrive in Port Chester, N.Y.

"Katherine Choy was a pioneering figure in the emergent world of mid-twentieth century American studio ceramics, and her widely exhibited clay vessels explored many of the same formal ideas that were at play in the concurrent field of abstract expressionist painting," says Historical Society Curator of Exhibitions and Collections Maggie Dimock. "Her technical proficiency, visionary style and personal charisma came together in the founding of the Clay Art Center in 1957, a life's dream Choy realized with co-founder Henry Okamoto of Greenwich. This was all achieved at the young age of twenty-nine, and it is made more poignant by Choy's unexpected death the following year. Greenwich Historical Society is privileged to partner with Clay Art Center to present this exhibition of Choy's distinctive, groundbreaking works created during her time at Clay Art Center."

*Radical Pots & Cooperative Hands: Katherine Choy and Clay Art Center* is organized by the Greenwich Historical Society with artwork loans and research support provided by Clay Art Center. The exhibition is generously supported in part by the Josie Merck Foundation.

### **Workshops/Lectures/Curated Tours**

Public hands-on clay workshops and demonstrations, in partnership with Clay Art Center, will be offered throughout the exhibition's run, beginning with a lecture and demonstration on wheel throwing in the style of Katherine Choy on Thursday, October 26 at 6:30 p.m., presented by Clay Art Center teaching artist Jeanne Carreau and Director Emeritus of Clay Art Center Reena Kashyap. A hands-on clay

workshop dedicated to hand-building organic vase forms, led by Clay Art Center artist-in-residence Avery Wells, will be offered Thursday, November 2 at 6:30 p.m.

Curator-led gallery talks will also be offered, beginning with *Visionary Art Pottery and Studio Craft in Our Backyard: Leon Gambetta Volkmar and Katherine Choy*, a discussion and guided tour takes place Friday November 10 at 11 a.m. The talk will explore connections between the lives and legacies of Greenwich-area ceramic artists Leon Gambetta Volkmar (1879-1959) and Katherine Choy. A prominent figure in the New York art pottery world, Volkmar's handcrafted and sensitively glazed ceramic vessels were nationally recognized and collected broadly by connoisseurs, including the Bush-Holley House's one-time resident Emma Constant Holley MacRae. A selection of Volkmar pieces from the Greenwich Historical Society Museum Collection will be on display in the Historical Society's Permanent Collections Gallery for the duration of the exhibition.

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### **About Katherine Choy: Ceramic Artist and Educator**

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### **The Formation of Clay Art Center**

In the spring of 1957, following her dream to establish a fully independent working studio for ceramic artists, Choy gathered a small group of like-minded artists and former students and relocated to a commercial-sized workspace on Beech Street in Port Chester, the former Good Earth Pottery company where Choy had previously worked. Under Choy's leadership Clay Art Center for Advanced Study in Ceramics and Sculpture was formed, one of the first cooperative studios dedicated solely to creative ceramic art in the U.S., later known simply as Clay Art Center. Choy was supported in this endeavor by Clay Art Center Co-founder and potter **Henry Okamoto** (1922-1988), a native of Lodi, California who moved to Cos Cob, Connecticut in the mid-1950s. Through their leadership Clay Art Center's reputation as a serious center for ceramic study and artistic production grew among American potters.

### **A Life Cut Short, and a Vision Endures**

In 1958, the ceramic art world and Clay Art Center were rocked by Choy's unexpected death at the young age of 30, less than a year after the Center was founded. However, under Okamoto's oversight, Clay Art Center's mission endured. Today Clay Art Center is the largest and most active ceramic facility in the tristate area and a nationally recognized nonprofit dedicated to the advancement and practice of ceramic art.

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